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## THEY SAID IT

Public-sector unionism is a very different animal from private-sector unionism. It is not adversarial but collusive. Public-sector unions strive to elect their management, which in turn can extract money from taxpayers to increase wages and benefits – and can promise pensions that future taxpayers will have to fund.

The results are plain to see. States such as New York, New Jersey and California, where public-sector unions are strong, now face enormous budget deficits and pension liabilities. In such states, the public sector has become a parasite sucking the life out of the private-sector economy. Not surprisingly, Americans have been steadily migrating out of such states and into states like Texas, where public-sector unions are weak and taxes are much lower.

Michael Barone, “Public-Sector Unions Bleed Taxpayers,”  
February 7, 2010.

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## WHELPING THE DOGS OF WAR, REDUX.

Gird your loins, ladies and gentlemen, and beat the drums of war. It is coming. As surely as the sun rises in the east and Bill Clinton digs interns, war is coming. And as war always is, it will be ugly and destructive. And when it's over, everything will have changed.

This won't be a war against a foreign aggressor or an existential and nebulous attacker. It will be a war within the states, a civil war. And like the previous civil war, it will pit brother against brother and father against son. The hostilities will rage for years and will destroy families, friendships, and maybe even governments.

If all of this sounds a little cynical and more than a little over the top, then we apologize. But many years ago, we recognized the wisdom of our old friend Bob Feinberg's comment on his own track record as a Washington forecaster, i.e. “the only time I'm ever wrong is when I'm not cynical enough.” In fact, once when someone asked Bob the color a car that was sitting down the street, he responded, “Red. On this side.”

But if it's a silver lining you're looking for, then take heart: the “casualties” in this war will be largely metaphorical. There will be real and serious damage done and real and serious pain inflicted, but there will be little, if any bloodshed. This war will take place within the confines of a civilized nation, with the victories and losses measured in budgetary, rather than human terms.

Like nearly all wars throughout history, this one will be about resources and their scarcity. As the resources run out, competition for them will increase. And as competition increases, hostilities will commence. Truth be told, they've already begun.

The proximate cause of this war – or wars, really – will be the inability of government to sustain itself in its current bloated condition. The fact of the matter is that government at all levels in this country has grown too large too fast and will simply be unable to maintain its massive girth. At current levels of taxation, there simply are not enough resources available to maintain the bloat that plagues the federal and especially the state and local governments. Something is going to have to give.

As for what will “give,” there are handful of possibilities. It is possible that the electorate will give (and give . . . .and give) in the form of substantially higher taxes. If this is the case, then the war will rage primarily between the public sector and the private sector, between the bloated Leviathan and the productive economy. Taxpayers will rebel. Governments will fall. Businesses will move. Jobs will be lost.

It is also possible that the operators of said governments will choose instead to make those within the public sector give, by compelling them to accept force reductions, lower wages, and reduced pensions and other benefits. In such a case, the combatants will primarily be government bureaucracies, fighting each other and fighting elected officials for the spoils – though it should be mentioned that there will be a great many innocent bystanders caught in the crossfire as well. Regarding this, we would do well to remember that Government exists to serve the community that established it, and when government suffers, as it most certainly will throughout this war, the community will suffer with it.

If you want an idea of how this is all going to play out, *The Wall Street Journal* provided an excellent insight last week into the early skirmishes in this war and the tactics that will all but certainly be employed by

its combatants. In a piece about how hard times are impacting law enforcement, the *Journal* reported the following:

It has become a recession mantra: Do more with less.

Now, this heartland city [Tulsa, Oklahoma] is testing whether that's possible when it comes to public safety.

Since January, Tulsa has laid off 89 police officers, 11% of its force. That has pushed the city to the forefront of a national movement, spurred by hard times, to revamp long-held policing strategies.

In the crosshairs: community-policing initiatives created over the past two decades, such as having officers work in troubled schools, attend neighborhood-watch meetings and help small-business owners address nuisance crimes like graffiti. Such efforts are popular, and some experts credit them with contributing to the steady drop in the national crime rate since 1991.

But after years of expanding and taking on new duties, police chiefs say they have little choice but to retrench.

“Departments are pulling back to their Alamo—providing patrols and responding to calls for service,” says Jason Stamps, director of professional training at the Northwestern University Center for Public Safety.

Cuts have swept communities from Stockton, Calif., to Naperville, Ill., depleting some departments to 1980s-era staff levels.

The strain in New York and communities nationwide reminds William Bratton, former police chief in New York and Los Angeles, of the 1970s and 1980s. Then, departments lacked resources to focus on crime prevention and community partnerships, or deal with crimes such as drug dealing and prostitution.

“You’d think we would have learned our lessons from the past,” says Mr. Bratton, who now runs Altegrity Security Consulting. “Policing still requires boots on the ground.”

Citizens and officers in Tulsa are finding out together what fewer cops means.

The police have curtailed community outreach, investigations, undercover work, surveillance, even traffic enforcement, and poured many remaining resources into bread-and-butter street patrols.

The domestic-violence unit lost two officers, leaving four to handle about 5,000 cases a year. The undercover units that used to focus on armed gangs in public housing projects have disbanded. Veteran narcotics detectives are back in cruisers, answering 911 calls.

Sounds awful, doesn’t it? Everyone knows that community policing initiatives and “broken windows” approaches to policing helped turn New York around under the leadership of Mayor Rudy Giuliani. And everyone knows that those techniques have been implemented elsewhere, with great success. But now, all that is in jeopardy.

And, though unmentioned, everyone knows that all of that is in jeopardy because silly citizens are unhappy about taxes and about paying for the additional police. “Cut the government!” Tea Partiers cry. Reduce the

bloat! But that “bloat” is the police, who protect and serve (by definition). So how do you feel about yourselves, now, small government nuts?

Well, fortunately, the *Journal* continues, and about half-way through the story, provides these tasty nuggets about Tulsa:

In the past four decades, the city’s population has jumped 17%—and the police department budget has soared to \$87 million from about \$4 million, according to a city council report.

The force expanded from 507 sworn officers in 1969 to a high of 829 two years ago, before falling to 702 today. Costs also rose due to union-negotiated salary increases and bonuses. Base pay for a recruit in Tulsa is about \$44,000, but officers can take home another \$7,000 to \$10,000 a year, or more, with overtime and other perks.

The city’s average cost for each full-time police employee, including salary and benefits, is now 9.5 times what it was in the 1969-70 budget. By comparison, per-employee costs in the fire department are 8.5 times greater and costs for all other employees are about 8 times greater.

Officers get bonuses for longevity and fluency in a second language, and collect equipment allowances for serving in special units. Until this year, officers could drive their patrol cars home after work—with Tulsa taxpayers footing the gas bill—even if they lived miles outside the city.

The costs were manageable until last April, when sales-tax revenues plunged and kept on falling. The city budget was in shambles. Police, like other city

employees, agreed to take eight unpaid furlough days. Incoming Mayor Bartlett, who took office in December, felt that wasn't enough.

Mr. Bartlett proposed halting promotions and abolishing a slew of senior positions through attrition. He also asked police to pay a larger share of their pensions. Otherwise, he said, he would be forced to lay off officers.

Firefighters accepted a similar deal. "They felt it was more important at this point to protect the city and keep everyone employed," says Stan May, president of the firefighters' union. But police called the mayor's offer extortion and accused him of union-busting. Members overwhelmingly rejected the deal.

That changes things a bit, doesn't it? Now, the layoffs can be placed in greater context. The culprit here is not the stingy taxpayer who is also suffering from the slowdown and already feels overburdened. The culprit is someone else, someone who would rather sacrifice police officers (figuratively, of course) than lose a cushy pension. The firefighters, we see, took their hit. But the police – or, to be more accurate and fair, the police UNION – refused to do the same. The firefighters sued for peace. But the policemen's union decided instead to go to war.

How's that war working out? And, more to the point, who is paying the price?

The new [Tulsa Police] chief, Chuck Jordan, isn't so sanguine: Without more cops, he says, he is concerned safety "will start to erode over time."

Strain is beginning to show.

Average response time for top-priority 911 calls (generally felonies in progress) was 18% slower this February than the

previous year, edging up to eight minutes, according to city data. Response time improved slightly in March, to 7 minutes 30 seconds, 6% slower than last March.

One evening in late March, a 6-year-old girl ran from her home in north Tulsa. The department owns two helicopters with heat-seeking technology to assist in searches, but they have been grounded for lack of funds. So more than three dozen officers fanned out.

They found the girl unharmed. But the three-hour search tied up so many units that 911 dispatchers held a burglary-in-progress call for six minutes before finding a free officer, according to Sgt. Ron Kawano, who reviewed city dispatch logs at the Journal's request.

A call reporting a drunk man who was threatening to get a shotgun was held for nine minutes before an available patrol could be located, records show. And when three 911 calls in quick succession reported a woman being beaten, it took about 20 minutes for a single officer, with no backup, to reach the house. No arrests were made in any of the incidents.

Arrests citywide were down about 25% in February and March, compared with the previous year. Through the end of March, county prosecutors, who get most of their cases from Tulsa police, had filed 20% fewer felony cases than last year.

If the trend holds, that could indicate the city is safer. But some officers believe arrests are down because the detective corps was cut by nearly 20%, so fewer crimes are being investigated.

The department has also stopped sending detectives to question many suspects in custody. "We are losing confessions. We

are going to lose cases,” says Maj. Matt Kirkland, who oversees the detective division.

The *Journal* notes that some people in the community are concerned that “officers may be deliberately slowing down to show public safety has suffered.” Given that we have friends who work very hard and very dedicatedly in law enforcement, we doubt very much that any such conscious decision has been made by more than a handful of officers, if that. But we’ll readily concede that we can’t speak for the union bosses. Whether or not they see the public’s loss as their own gain is therefore an open question.

In any case, the motivation for the slowdown in police response is irrelevant. The fact that a slowdown has taken place isn’t. People are suffering. And they’re suffering because the police union in Tulsa decided that its pensions were more important than an extra 85 officers on the job. Battle lines were drawn, and the victims are real, motivation notwithstanding.

Now, don’t think for a second that policing is the only area in which this war is being waged or will be waged. This is, rather, the future of all public bureaucracies and all public services.

Consider, for example, education. Can teachers be laid off? And if they can be, can the good ones be kept and the bad ones let go? The answers to these questions are nebulous, naturally, and vary from school district to school district, depending on employment contracts. But in general, the answers are “not easily,” and “no chance.” Layoffs in most places, under most teachers’ contracts will stipulate that seniority, rather than effectiveness will be the determining variable in any layoffs, which is to say that it doesn’t matter if you can teach, only whether you’ve been doing it for a long time.

Or consider, if you will, the case of higher education. Think about the not-so-hypothetical case of a state university system with three principal campuses. The flagship campus is not unionized, but the other two

are. If we told you that faculty at one campus would get no raise (in tight economic times), while faculty at the other two would get raises, which campus, do you suppose, would get the proverbial short stick? And what if we told you that one campus would actually have to cut faculty for next year, while the other two would remain at full force, which campus would you expect to be breaking out the buyouts and the early retirement packages? Additionally, how long do you think it would take under these conditions for the faculty at one campus to begin to resent those at the other campuses or, more likely, for the faculty at the non-unionized campus to add two-and-two to come up with a union-approved answer?

Finally, how will the state possibly get by on fewer resources when it is unable to cut anything because all its campuses are unionized and the unions won’t permit cuts? We think all of the other questions pretty much answer themselves, but we’ll give you this one: it won’t.

And if the state won’t cut, what choice will it have but to attempt to raise revenues?

To make matters worse, the early stages of this war have been relatively mild, and the worst is all but certain to come. Recall that much of last year’s \$900 billion “stimulus” package went to prop up state and local governments and to fill in budget gaps and to “save” government jobs. All of which is to say that the resources war has been delayed by federal government and Chinese bondholder largesse. But that won’t be the case next year. Or the year after.

Eventually, the bill will come due. And then, there will be a great and gory fight to make sure that someone else has to pay it.

We can’t say this enough: A war is coming, brothers and sisters. And when it is fully engaged, it will be a mess.

## SUCKS DONUT.

You'll have to forgive us, but we're going to play against type here for a few paragraphs. This may annoy a few of you. Heck, it kind of annoys us. But we can't hold our tongues anymore:

Lay off Barack Obama already.

Not on everything, mind you. But on one matter and one matter only – the Gulf Coast oil spill.

The spill itself, the clean-up confusion, the vastness of the potential environmental disaster, the tens of thousands of jobs lost . . . None of these is Obama's fault. Not one. He couldn't have stopped the explosion. He couldn't have known how badly the well was leaking. He couldn't have known that BP was low-balling its assessment of the damage and possible devastation. He couldn't have saved the gulls or the fish or the shrimp. He couldn't have done much of anything at all.

We guess it's possible that he could have called in Homeland Security big shot Janet Napolitano a little earlier and had her organize a task force of some sort. But really, what could she have done? Obama lost the right to expect competence or expertise from the head of Homeland Security the day he nominated Napolitano for the post – although in fairness, it's hard to imagine what even a competent and expert bureaucrat would have done under the circumstances.

Perhaps the government could have done this, or organized that, or rounded up the other. But the fact remains that this disaster was caused when BP's rig blew up and is the result and responsibility exclusively of BP and whatever or whoever caused the explosion. None of this had anything to do with Barack Obama. And we'd all be better off if we stopped insisting that it did.

What's most fascinating about this, we think, is that it's not just conservatives piling on here. Included among those insisting that this oil spill is Obama's problem, that he should have done something about it much sooner, and, because he didn't, that he should

now suffer the political consequences are more than a few mainstream media types and other erstwhile Obamaphiles. Even the *New York Times* piled on over the weekend, with both a long news story and an editorial accusing Obama et al. of negligence. The latter of the two read as follows:

A White House as politically attuned as this one should have been conscious of two obvious historical lessons. One was the Exxon Valdez, where a late and lame response by both industry and the federal government all but destroyed one of the country's richest fishing grounds and ended up costing billions of dollars. The other was President George W. Bush's hapless response to Hurricane Katrina.

Now we have another disaster in more or less the same neck of the woods, and it takes the administration more than a week to really get moving.

The timetable is damning. The blowout occurred on April 20. In short order, fire broke out on the rig, taking 11 lives, the rig collapsed and oil began leaking at a rate of 40,000 gallons a day. BP tried but failed to plug the well. Even so, BP appears to have remained confident that it could handle the situation with private resources (as did the administration) until Wednesday night, when, at a hastily called news conference, the Coast Guard quintupled its estimate of the leak to 5,000 barrels, or more than 200,000 gallons a day.

Only then did the administration move into high gear.

Ah yes. Katrina. That's the theme of the day here, isn't it? And how could it not be? After all, as the Timesmen note, this is the same part of the world and it involves accusations of the same sort of disconnect

from the tragedy as it unfolds. Obama is flat-footed this time, compounding Louisiana's misery. Is it any wonder that journalists, political commentators, and campaign consultants from around the country have taken to calling this "Obama's Katrina"? It really is just too good to pass up.

Of course, that's not what we're calling it. We're calling it a Sucks Donut.

A Sucks Donut, for those of you who don't know, is related to that old, childhood delicacy known as the Hertz Donut – something with which we assume that all of you, but especially those of you who had older brothers, are familiar. Any of you who are unfamiliar with the concept, should go out right now and call your big brother and ask him what one is. Or ask your meanest nephew, son, or grandson. Or walk over the nearest grade school and ask the biggest, roughest-looking 6<sup>th</sup> grader. Or, if all else fails, just Google it.

As best we can tell, there are two distinct yet intricately related phenomena at work here in this Sucks Donut. The first is just plain, good, old fashioned partisanship. Our guy got raked over the coals for something he didn't do, couldn't possibly have fixed, and that was in no way, shape, or form his fault. And it only seems fair to do it to their guy, now that he sits in the big chair. Obama's Katrina? You bet. And just like George Bush was not and never should have been considered responsible for Katrina yet suffered mercilessly for it, so Obama should suffer for this, irrespective of any actual culpability.

We have to admit that this argument appeals to us. It strikes us that presidents from both parties should be held to the same standards. If it is fair to destroy the Bush presidency over something he simply couldn't control, then it should equally fair to do the same to Obama. Tit for tat, eye for an eye, and all that business.

The problem with this is that it is both morally and practically perilous. Two wrongs, as they say, don't make a right. And "getting even" is hardly the basis of sound governance. The only thing worse than a

crippled and therefore completely useless president is a president who was crippled and made completely useless over something unreasonable and foolish. We think it kinda goes without saying that we don't much care for Barack Obama; but the guy is going to be president for at least another nearly three years, three very important years. Having him sitting uselessly on the sidelines, a failed and pathetic Carter-redo might be personally and ideologically satisfying, but it would hardly be in the country's best interests.

The second, related phenomenon at work in the Sucks Donut is one that centers on the president and government in general and their ability to perform even the most implausible tasks. This manifests itself in the belief that Obama should, like Bush, be criticized for failing to stop the devastation in the Gulf because he *should* have been able to stop the devastation or at least should have done something, anything.

Whereas the tit-for-tat argument has provided much of the motivation behind the criticism of Obama on the right, this, second argument – that a president should be engaged at all times on all matters – has spurred the criticism of the President on the left. It was, for example, the motivating force behind the *New York Times* editorial cited above. And it is absurd.

Like the critics on the right, the critics proffering this argument believe that Obama should be treated as harshly as Bush was. But unlike the others, they actually believe that criticism of both is legitimate. Like we said, absurd.

One of the greatest and most persistent obstacles to effective governance in the modern democratic West is the belief that somehow government should be able to do something about everything. Got a health insurance complaint? Government will fix it. Got a problem with daycare? Government will fix it. Tired of your below-sea-level home flooding? Government will fix it. Got a massive oil slick heading your way and threatening to destroy your way of life? Government will fix it.

The inevitable consequence of bigger and more intrusive government that promises to be everything to everyone is the quite natural expectation that government will actually be everything to everyone. The president morphs from being the head of the executive branch of the federal government into the national Superman, expected to be able to leap tall buildings in a single bound and save small children from everything from toxic Chinese choo-choo trains to undercooked hamburgers. Why then can't he save the Gulf Coast from an oil spill? That's what Superman would do, after all.

Nearly five decades ago, when the great Theodore Lowi wrote his landmark treatise on American government, *The End of Liberalism*, one of his principal concerns with the rise of interest-group democracy was the manner in which it would distort the electorate's expectations of government. We're not entirely sure that this is what he had in mind, but *voila*. Expectations are certainly distorted. And the consequences for democratic governance are too weighty even to contemplate.

The expectation of government omnipotence and presidential omniscience has not only guaranteed presidential failure, but has also created a universe of monstrously perverse incentives. When the guy sitting in the Oval Office can be blamed for any misfortune that befalls anyone, anywhere in the world, then he has a political motivation to ensure that no misfortune befalls anyone, anywhere in the world or, if it does, that he is there right away to make it all better. This is crazy.

Recall that when the Avian flu briefly made headlines five years ago, killing a handful of people in rural Vietnam and a handful of birds elsewhere, the press went crazy. Then-President Bush became the whipping boy in the "preparedness" meme. Bush was failing. He needed to get moving. And so he did, promising among other things to develop plans to use the American military against the American people to

enforce domestic quarantines. Ummm . . . pardon us, but . . . yikes!

Bush was tasked with and blamed for the impossible and in response pledged the unthinkable. And this is the way it works.

What we are left with then, given all of this, is a mess, to put it mildly. We have an opposition party waiting to attack the president for any little mistake, regardless of relevance or consequence. We have a mainstream press waiting and willing to attack a president for failing to do that which he shouldn't or can't do. We have a populace that is so enervated by decades of excessive government intervention that it simply expects that government will save them from whatever calamity arises. And, as a result, we have a system that encourages the government to take action on all matters – regardless of the importance of the matter or the effectiveness of the action – in order simply to appear to be "doing something."

Again, pardon us, but . . . blech. This, not "offshore drilling," is the real disaster here.

Meanwhile, Barack Obama's legions are out not simply "doing something" but insisting as well that they have been doing something all along. The attacks on their guy, they argue (and not without merit) are silly and superficial, based on pure partisan exploitation of tragedy and the unrealistic and foolish expectations of people who have no idea what the hell they're talking about.

If there weren't so much at stake here, we'd be laughing at them. Welcome to our nightmare, fellas. Now you know how we felt from 2001-2009. Sucks Donut. Or, to spell it out more clearly....

...Sucks, don't it?

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